

With Open Arms

"With Open Arms" brings together a series of sculptures that explore notions of welcome, care and acceptance in the contemporary world. The exhibition creates moments of optimism in a world that is deeply undercut by currents of anxiety, while simultaneously acknowledging the truth of that anxiety.

This tension is strongly illustrated by "The Rescuers", the work that sits closest to the real world. It was inspired by images of a woman rescuing a koala during the 2020 bushfires, literally wrapping the animal in the shirt from her back. To me this was such a potent image of active, positive care in the face of an overwhelming catastrophe. It reminds me that we can do something, even though we sometimes feel powerless. I wanted to make a sculpture that feels like a monument to this idea, like something that might go in a public square. However, this is a monument celebrating care rather than conquest. It is an image of two young people, moving forward together with another animal. The piece shows us both the danger but also the possibility of rescue. It reminds us that we can and do contain the seeds for a positive relationship with the land and creatures that surround and sustain us.

I am deeply interested in thinking about contemporary, technological experiences of the natural world, and how we might reimagine the natural and our relationship with it. This exhibition brings together works that range from the naturalistic to the more stylised and abstracted. These more stylised sculptures focus on birds, which are an interesting way into this world. My birds are both genuine creatures and metaphors. Like all my works, they are hybrids of ideas, reality, nature and the human world of technology.

Birds are the wild animals that we see most often in our cities. They call to us and each other from telephone poles and roadside plantings. Their extraordinary resilience is inspiring, and is due in no small part to their ability to traverse the sky. The sky, with its boundless possibilities, is something that they occupy, while we stand earthbound and can only watch in wonder.

Birds are also a wonderful reminder of evolution. They are dinosaurs adapted to the changing conditions of our world. Less grandiose than Tyrannosaurs but so much more successfully enduring. In that way they demonstrate that evolution is about adaption rather than domination.

This idea of birds is the starting point for several of the works in this exhibition. However, the creatures themselves are far more surreal than that. I am interested in turning the technique of hyperrealism away from its slavish fixation with the real, and doing something very different with it. This opens up so many more possibilities and allows the works to take us to new places. In these works I am working with vibrant colours, and juxtaposing these against the textural naturalism of the silicone.

Colour is a big part of this exhibition. Much of that colour is drawn from technological objects - sneakers, cars, clothing - and the rest comes from nature. That seems about right to me. I've been struggling to think about how to discuss the colour in these works. Colour is very important, however the work is not really 'about' colour. There is something very instinctual and emotional about putting colours together. I can absolutely see what the colours do to the works, but it is very hard to put into words quite how they do it. Colour can easily be presented as 'merely decorative' but it is an essential part of the natural world, and I like to imagine that it speaks to us on a cellular level.

I am also returning to a very personal hybridity that I have explored for many years, merging organic creatures and bodies with entirely artificial objects. This is a classic surrealism move - think of Meret Oppenheim - but the amorphous nature of silicone allows for a more seamless blending. So in this exhibition we find birds - representing freedom, optimism, resilience - intermingling with another long held fascination of mine: shoes.

I am always surprised at how deeply united these two heterogeneous forms can become, almost to the point where we stop seeing the shoes as anything other than a natural extension of the creature's physiognomy. That is very much the point. I am interested in undermining the notional boundaries that we so often create. Thus in these works it is hard to see where the artificial ends and the natural begins.

The birds I am looking at - the albatross, the owl and the pelican - each have their own stories and symbolism. The albatross traverses vast distances, yet returns to the same nesting site to breed. They are monogamous and engage in beautiful courtship dances. They are also a potent symbol of our relationship with nature, in that they bring good fortune when respected but ill fortune when killed.

Owls are similarly symbolic. Their association with wisdom has much to do with our innate desire to connect and anthropomorphise. We see ourselves in them, in the way they hold their heads and their perfect serene stillness. I am drawn to their perfect camouflage, the way they sit invisibly in the branches until they move. I'm fascinated by this magical moment of transformation, when they go from being part of the tree to an entirely independent being. We see this in the sculptures, where elements straddle a line between parts of the body and things from the world.

Pelicans are communal birds, flocking together and appearing out of nowhere when unexpected rains transform salt flats into inland seas. Nobody knows how they know where and when to come, but somehow they do. Again, this is a sort of natural magic. My boot-like pelican hybrid presents an image of open armed care, its iconic beak and pouch transformed into a decorative cowboy boot. This work is a surreal, flamboyant celebration of parenting.

But why shoes? Very much like birds, these are fascinating things both aesthetically and symbolically. Shoes, especially sneakers, are incredibly ubiquitous pieces of the industrialised everyday, yet we rarely stop to think of the extraordinary technologies behind them. They sit at the cutting edge of objects that we are able to create yet they are essentially disposable. When you think about it, every sneaker is a marvel.

Sneakers also represent one of the last remaining clothing design spaces with room for flamboyance. Outside of the world of "high fashion", which many more people will watch rather than wear, clothes are increasingly restrained. On the whole, both clothing manufacturers and consumers have converged on a sort of comfortable minimalism. As if they realise that, like a brightly coloured bird, you take a risk if you stand out too much. Few feel safe enough these days to want to take too many risks. Sneakers however are a safe space. They are an item of clothing where we feel ok with a bit of exuberance, and I love

them for that. I love their weird shapes and textures and colours. I love the flash of electric blue that peeks from beneath a black pants leg.

You can also see this iconography peeking out from "The Bond". At first glance it is a quite traditional image of a mother and child, but on further inspection we can see that the child is something different, a hybrid. While their face is familiar, their body is more ambiguous. Definitely an animal but with a back that reminds us of the sole of a running shoe. Perhaps this depicts a common evolutionary trait, where animals like stick insects disguise themselves as part of their environment. This highlights the strange and super-specific cleverness of evolution which deeply connects species with their particular environments. In this case, the creature's mimicry of a piece of consumer sportswear locates it unequivocally within our world.

However, it is not the surreal difference of the creature that is the key to this work, but the familiar connection. There is a love and care here that transcends difference or strangeness. These figures are unconcerned about their difference, perhaps even linked by it. There is an open armed acceptance, even as there is an open armed physicality in the woman's embrace of the child.

Patricia Piccinini, 2025